DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 587 CS 207 565

AUTHOR Randall, Tony
TITLE How To Improve Your Vocabulary. Power of the Printed Word.
INSTITUTION International Paper Co., New York, NY.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM "Power of the Printed Word," International Paper Co., Dept 2, P.O. Box 900, Elmsford, New York 10523.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Dictionaries; Guidelines; *Improvement; *Vocabulary Development; *Vocabulary Skills
IDENTIFIERS PF Project; Prefixes; Root Words; Words

ABSTRACT

The following pointers can help people learn and remember new words. First, try to guess the meaning of the word from the way it's used. At least part of a word's meaning can be determined from the context of the sentence. To find out exactly what the word means and where it comes from, look it up in a dictionary. To get at the meaning behind the word, it is necessary to determine its roots. Learning roots: (1) helps with remembering words, (2) gives a deeper understanding of them, and (3) allows the learning of whole families of new words at a time. Another important clue to the meaning of a word is the prefix. There aren't many prefixes and they are easy to learn. Once new words have been learned, they should be put to work immediately. But be careful not to sound like a stuffed shirt; use them when they sound natural. (DC)

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HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR VOCABULARY
POWER OF THE PRINTED WORD

by

Tony Randall

International Paper Company

1979

CS207565

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How to improve your vocabulary

By Tony Randall

International Paper asked Tony Randall—who is on The American Heritage Dictionary Usage Panel, and loves words almost as much as acting—to tell how he has acquired his enormous vocabulary.

Words can make us laugh, cry, go to war, fall in love.

Rudyard Kipling called words the most powerful drug of mankind. If they are, I'm a hopeless addict—and I hope to get you hooked, too!

Whether you're still in school or you head up a corporation, the better command you have of words, the better chance you have of saying exactly what you mean, of understanding what others mean—and of getting what you want in the world.

English is the richest language—with the largest vocabulary on earth. Over 1,000,000 words!

You can express shades of meaning that aren't even *possible* in other languages. (For example, you can differentiate between "sky" and "heaven." The French, Italians and Spanish cannot.)

Yet, the average adult has a vocabulary of only 30,000 to 60,000 words. Imagine what we're missing!

Here are five pointers that help me learn—and remember—whole *families* of words at a time.

They may not *look* easy—and won't be at first. But if you stick with them you'll find they *work!*

What's the first thing to do when you see a word you don't know?

1. Try to guess the meaning of the word from the way it's used

You can often get at least *part* of a word's meaning—just from how it's used in a sentence.

That's why it's so important to read as much as you can—different *kinds* of things: magazines, books, newspapers you don't normally read. The more you *expose* yourself to new words, the more words you'll pick up *just by seeing how they're used.*

For instance, say you run across the word "manacle":

> "The manacles had been on John's wrists for 30 years. Only one person had a key—his wife."

You have a good *idea* of what "manacles" are—just from the context of the sentence.

But let's find out *exactly* what the word means and where it comes from. The only way to do this, and to build an extensive vocabulary *fast,* is to go to the dictionary. (How lucky, you *can*—Shakespeare *couldn't.* There *wasn't* an English dictionary in his day!)

So you go to the dictionary. (NOTE: Don't let dictionary abbreviations put you off. The front tells you what they mean, and even has a guide to pronunciation.)

2. Look it up

Here's the definition for "manacle" in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.*

man-a-cle (măn'ə-kəl) *n.* Usually plural. **1.** A device for confining the hands, usually consisting of two metal rings that are fastened about the wrists and joined by a metal chain; a handcuff. **2.** Anything that confines or restrains.—*tr.v.* **manacled, -cling, -cles. 1.** To restrain with manacles. **2.** To confine or restrain as if with manacles; shackle; fetter. [Middle English *manicle,* from Old French, from Latin *manicula,* little hand, handle, diminutive of *manus,* hand. See **man-**[2] in Appendix.*]

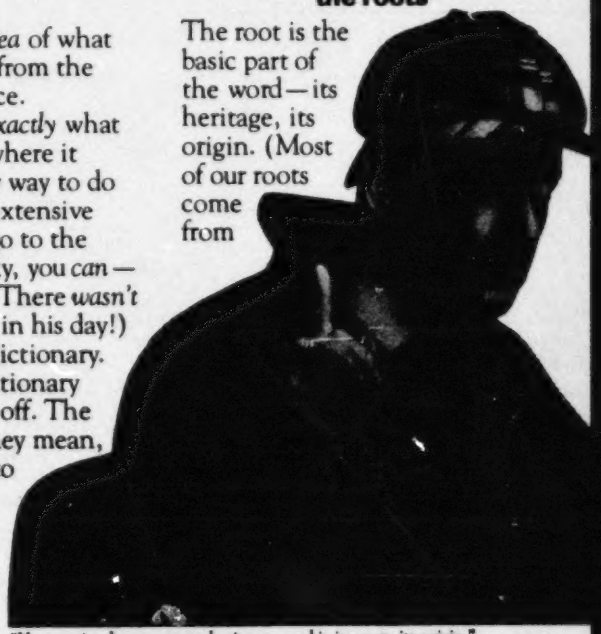
The first definition fits here: A device for confining the hands, usually consisting of two metal rings that are fastened about the wrists and joined by a metal chain; a handcuff.

Well, that's what you *thought* it meant. But what's the idea *behind* the word? What are its *roots?* To really understand a word, you need to know.

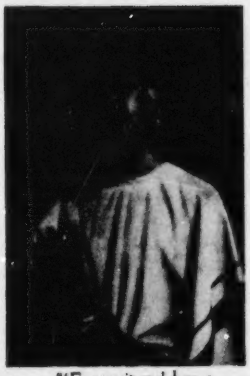
Here's where the detective work—and the *fun*—begins.

3. Dig the meaning out by the roots

The root is the basic part of the word—its heritage, its origin. (Most of our roots come from



"Your main clue to remembering a word is its root—its origin."



"'Emancipate' has a Latin root. Learn it and you'll know other words at a glance."

Latin and Greek words at least 2,000 years old—which come from even earlier Indo-European tongues!)

Learning the roots: 1) Helps us *remember* words. 2) Gives us a deeper understanding of the words we *already* know. And 3) allows us to pick up whole families of *new* words at a time. That's why learning the root is the *most important part of going to the dictionary.*

Notice the root of "manacle" is *manus* (Latin) meaning "hand."

Well, that makes sense. Now, other words with this root, man, start to make sense, too.

Take manual—something done "by hand" (manual labor) or a "handbook." And manage—to "handle" something (as a manager). When you emancipate someone, you're taking him "from the hands of" someone else.

When you manufacture something, you "make it by hand" (in its original meaning).

And when you finish your first novel, your publisher will see your—originally "handwritten"—manuscript.

Imagine! A whole new world of words opens up—just from one simple root!

The root gives the *basic* clue to the meaning of a word. But there's another important clue that runs a close second—the *prefix.*

4. Get the powerful prefixes under your belt

A prefix is the part that's sometimes attached to the front of a word. Like—well, *prefix!* There aren't many—less than 100 major prefixes—and you'll learn them in no time at all just by becoming more aware of the meanings of words you already know.

Here are a few. (Some of the "How-to" vocabulary-building books will give you the others.)

PREFIX		MEANING	EXAMPLES	
(Lat.)	(Gk.)			(Literal sense)
com, con, co, col, cor	sym, syn, syl	with, very, together	conform sympathy	(form with) (feeling with)
in, im, il, ir	a, an	not, without	innocent amorphous	(not wicked) (without form)
contra, counter	anti, ant	against, opposite	contravene antidote	(come against) (give against)

Now, see how the *prefix* (along with the context) helps you get the meaning of the italicized words:

- "If you're going to be my witness, your story must *corroborate* my story." (The literal meaning of *corroborate* is "strength together".)
- "You told me one thing—now you tell me another. Don't *contradict* yourself." (The literal meaning of *contradict* is "say against".)
- "Oh, that snake's not poisonous. It's a completely *innocuous* little garden snake." (The literal meaning of *innocuous* is "not harmful".)

Now, you've got some new words. What are you going to do with them?

5. Put your new words to work at once

Use them several times the first day you learn them. Say them out loud! Write them in sentences.

Should you "use" them on *friends*? Careful—you don't want them to think you're a stuffed shirt. (It depends on the situation. You *know* when a word sounds natural—and when it sounds stuffy.)

How about your *enemies*? You have my blessing. Ask one of them if he's read that article on pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis. (You really can find it in the dictionary.) Now, you're one up on him.

So what do you do to improve your vocabulary?

Remember: 1) Try to guess the meaning of the word from the way it's used. 2) Look it up. 3) Dig the meaning out by the roots. 4) Get the powerful prefixes under your belt. 5) Put your new words to work at once.

That's all there is to it—you're off on your treasure hunt.

Now, do you see why I love words so much?

Aristophanes said, "By words, the mind is excited and the spirit elated." It's as true today as it was

"The more words you know, the more you can use. What does 'corroborate' really mean? See the text."

when he said it in Athens—*2,400 years ago!*

I hope you're now like me—hooked on words forever.

Tony Rudel

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